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Blood and Beauty by Sarah Dunant

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Sarah Dunant, *Blood and Beauty*, Virago: London, 2013, 529pp.

Review by Carol M. Richardson, University of Edinburgh

The worst thing that the Borgia family ever did was to be born Spanish. Or rather, not Roman, nor even Italian. First and foremost, they worked for the benefit of the family, but so did most others in their position. Like the Piccolomini family from Siena who produced Pius II (1458-64) and Pius III (1503), and the della Rovere from Liguria from whence came Sixtus IV (1471-84) and Julius II (1503-13), the Borgia spawned two popes, Calixtus III (1455-58) and Alexander VI (1492-1503). But unlike the Piccolomini and the della Rovere, the Borgia were foreigners. As a result, many of the ambassadors' dispatches and court records on which the historical – and fictional – record depend, accentuate the negative.

We know quite a lot for sure about the Borgia family that upholds their modern-day reputation – and has made them the stuff of lurid historical television drama (1981 and 2011-) with first the avuncular gangster, Adolfo Celi, and, latterly, a less corpulent but wily Jeremy Irons in the lead role as Alexander VI. For a start we know that the Borgia's liked a good party. As a young cardinal, Rodrigo Borgia was scolded by the then pope, Pius II, for enjoying himself rather too much at a party in Siena in June 1460:

Our displeasure is unspeakable, for such conduct disgraces the ecclesiastical state and office. ... We leave it to your own judgement whether it is becoming to your dignity to pay court to ladies, to send fruit and wine to the one you love, and all day long to think of nothing but pleasure.

Into this field now comes Sarah Dunant's novel *Blood and Beauty*. Dunant is not afraid to deal head on with the scandals surrounding her subject. Her lively yet elegant prose builds a narrative up from the primary sources, bridging gaps and resurrecting her subjects by making them speak so that the reader is left not condoning, but appreciating, the complexities of the historical record. In 1501, for example, the papal master of ceremonies, Johannes Burchard, described the scurrilous party hosted by Cesare Borgia in his apartments in the Vatican Palace at which fifty courtesans

who, after the meal danced with the servants and others there, first fully dressed and then naked. Following the supper too, lampstands holding lighted candles were placed on the floor and chestnuts strewn about, which the prostitutes, naked and on their hands and knees, had to pick up as they crawled in an out amongst the lampstands.

Dunant weaves this narrative into her own, but allows Lucrezia to slip away before the frolics begin, though Burchard is careful to tell us she was there. What is surprising is not so much that events like this took place, but that the rather dour and apparently objective Burchard chose to describe it in his diary, albeit a private text. Michael Mallet, in his classic history of the family, suggests that, after almost a decade of Borgia rule in the highly partisan papal city, the master of ceremonies was tired of serving this particular clan.

Dunant brings her characters to life: Rodrigo Borgia/Alexander VI is an ageing, indulgent father, proud of his burgeoning offspring, who viewed his position as being as much about his family's advancement as the embodiment of the Apostolic Succession. Two of the most interesting figures in the book are the pope's unpredictable older son Cesare, briefly raised to become a cardinal but soon shifted in the direction of his military and procreation abilities, and his daughter Lucrezia, who starts off as a spotty, hormonal teenager, and blossoms into a damaged yet determined *principessa*. Their mother, Vanozza de Cataneis, who was replaced in

the pope's affections by the gorgeous Giulia Farnese, is depicted as a clever business lady, resolved to make the best of her position in her declining years.

The Borgia's have become something of a test-case for historians from either side of the Protestant/Catholic divide. The great nineteenth-century historian, whose survey of the renaissance popes remains the best secondary source for the period, Ludwig von Pastor, wrote that Alexander VI "seemed to possess all the qualities of a distinguished temporal ruler". Shortly after his study of Alexander was published in 1495, when asked how he could possibly remain a faithful Roman Catholic considering the evidence he had uncovered, Pastor replied, "Just because of the human weaknesses, which could not abolish Church and Papacy, I say the Church must be divine." For Protestant historians, such as von Ranke and Gregorovius, the Borgia could only ever prove that the Roman Church had gone badly wrong.

Dunant's constructs a novel out of the surviving historical record with refreshing honesty and inquisitiveness. This is not very different to the contribution of many learned historians but it is a lot more enjoyable to read. She does not pretend to solve the crimes of murder: did Cesare kill his own brother and his sister's second husband and only love? Or incest: did Lucrezia sleep with her brother and/or father? Many of the apparently innocent parties, princes of the urban courts that comprised the Papal States, are depicted as insecure despots who rented their nobility from the pope. The only disappointment is that the book ends rather abruptly, with Lucrezia's escape to her third marriage in Ferrara. A second installment is promised in which the end of Pope Alexander's reign and the decline of Borgia fortunes should make for an even more exciting tour through the complexities of Italian dynastic and papal history.